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ABSTRACT

Composition teachers and researchers recognize the difficulty young writers, especially females, face as they enter postsecondary education and attempt to learn the language of the academy. Addressing academic audiences "takes confidence and authority, qualities that are often challenged in women because of their historical exclusion from and marginal status within academic institutions" (G. Kirsch, 1993). Feminists often describe expressive writing as "personal" or "private" and academic writing as "public" at the same time they resist the dichotomy this description implies. An instructor conducted a series of freshman composition classes in which combining the methodology of composition studies and feminist theory was attempted. As students wrote, she looked at their responses to assignments and noted that some made the transition from personal to public more easily than others. A writing assignment can help students merge the personal and the academic by implementing exploratory in-class writing, research, peer collaboration, teacher-student conferencing, and revision. Students first write in class about their college experience, then read an article about the freshman year, discuss the article in class, and incorporate the material in their essays or look for additional material in the library. Essays are revised in successive drafts, going through peer collaboration, an individual conference with the teacher, and a final revision for a grade. (CR)

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ED 399 549

Personal Authority and the Female Writer

If you weren't too busy to look at the latest edition of *College English* while preparing to come to this conference, you may have read Richard E. Miller's article called "The Nervous System" where he complains about the "rift between the personal and the academic" which his reading has not prepared him to heal or "at least to build a bridge across its seemingly expansive divide". I am happy to be here today with a few suggestions which may encourage such bridge building.

As composition teachers and researchers, we recognize the difficulty young writers face as they enter post-secondary education and attempt to learn the language of the academy. Because they don't feel comfortable with the new style and the barrage of new material, students begin to distrust their own ideas and their written voice. Feminist theorists and educators believe that the problem is greater for women students because, as Gesa Kirsch points out in *Women Writing the Academy*, addressing academic audiences "takes confidence and authority, two qualities that are often challenged in women because of their historical exclusion from and marginal status within academic institutions". Feminists often describe expressive writing as "personal" or "private" and academic writing as "public" at the same time they resist the dichotomy this description implies. Instead of urging more expressive writing because it may be more compatible with the socialized female or arguing against academic writing for women students, many feminist compositionists encourage a blending of the two styles.

Writing teachers who combine composition and feminist theory put theory into practice by accepting greater stylistic variation. Reference to personal experience, use of the first person, and other techniques which merge the private and the public

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are allowed and encouraged as long as they achieve the writer's purpose and convey the desired message to the reader. This does not mean that conventional forms need not be taught; rather writers should learn that different styles can be effective in reaching different audiences. Phyllis Lassner claims that "by reading critically and writing both subjectively and analytically, students can learn to value their own expereinces as touchstones for academic learning". With this in mind, feminist educators give considerable attention to methods for teaching students to use the personal in a disciplined way so that it functions as an additional source of authority rather than as a diversion. Many academics have problems accepting this linking of private and public because for generations they have been held separate from one another. Universities even offer separate degrees: the arts and science degree for public activity and the fine arts degree for personal, expressive efforts. Robert Bezucha claims that

> resistance to feminism comes, in large part, from the fact that it seeks to undermine one of the most powerful and deeply held sets of distinctions drawn in Western thought and society: the separation of the public, the impersonal, the objective, on the one hand from the private, the personal, and the subjective, on the other . . . the private sphere is strongly associated with "female" activity.

Bezucha believes that feminist pedagogy is subversive because it represents a threat from within the academy to the idea that what has been traditionally separate may never be joined. I believe one of our most important tasks is to contest this sepaaration because it creates so many problems for beginning writers.

The use of argument may be the major area of contention in the

public/private issue. Traditional wisdom (and the history of rhetoric) support argument as the mode most appropriate for academics. I'm sure you know about Olivia Frey's study of PMLA articles between 1977 and 85 which showed that all but two of th4e articles used "adversary method, a method that demands that writers criticize and attack other scholars' work in order to advance their own position" (In Kirsch 19). There has been considerable debate among feminist theorists as to whether women, who may "find debate and confrontation uncomfortable" (In Steinitz and Kanter. should be forced to write and be graded on argument papers. Catherine Lamb offers a solution to this dilemma in her proposal for a feminist theory of composition which advocates negotiation and mediation as a way of moving beyond argument. She says, "Argument still has a place, although now as a means, not an end. The end—a resolution of conflict that is fair to both sides—is possible even in the apparent one-sidedness of written communication". Lamb's advice might well be taken to resolve the issue of public and private writing. Taking the suggestions of both compositionists and feminists, some kind of compromise can be negotiated in which all types of writing have legitimacy and where students learn to select wisely from a menu of rhetorical possibilities.

In the course of my own consideration of these issues, I conducted a series of freshman composition classes in which I attempted to combine the methodology of composition studies and feminist theory. As students wrote, I looked at their responses to assignments and noted that some students made the transition from personal to public more easily than others. Some enjoyed personal writing and only wanted to do that, while others naturally tended to avoid any private writing and thus experienced no transitional pain but had difficulty instead when asked specifically to write personal narratives or other kinds of expressive essays. I would

like to read some unedited comments from my own students. One wrote, "It is easiest for me to write from personal experience," while another in the same class said, "I feel most comfortable when arguing the subject of an essay. It comes naturally to me to argue." One complained, "Writing about controversial issues of today was really a difficult and gigantic step for me. I felt uncomfortable forming an opinion because I did not know exactly how I felt or what my standpoint really was," and another said, "Writing on topics that have personally affected myh life are the mot challenging to me and the ones I am least comfortable with." Interestingly, I found that gender made little difference in whether any particular student preferred private or public writing; rather, secondary school training and experience seemed to make the most difference. This is an encouraging discovery because it means that students of either gender can enjoy any style they feel prepared for and suggests that merging public and private is possible as well as desireable.

I'd like to close by offering one illustration of the type of writing assignment that might help students merge the personal and academic. It is a long-term assignment, based on process pedagogy and presented in segments. It implements exploratory in-class writing, research, peer collaboration, teacher-student conferencing, and revision.

The assignment begins with in-class writing during which students write about thier college experience. (Obviously this can't be done until part way through the first semester.) They consider such matters as what fears they had upon entering college and how these fears have grown or been relieved. They write about differences between high school and college, about living alone for the first time, about their study load, their tensions and their expected or unexpected pleasures. I collect these essays and return them ungraded but with comments about content.

I then distribute an academic article about the freshman year, something perhaps like the recent survey in the *Chronicle of Higher Education* about freshman attitudes and interests. We discuss the article as a class; then students either revise their essays to incorporate the new material or they go to the library to find further information. They might lookf or articles on retention of college students, minority student success rates, reasons for dropping out, maybe further statistics on college freshmen. Then they do a second or third draft of the essay, probably with a revised thesis. This draft goes through peer collaboration, another revision, an individual conference with the teacher, and a final revision for a grade.

This kind of activity moves students from private to public in a meaningful way and usually produces substantive results and is conducive to intellectual development. It is based on sound composition theory and also adheres to feminist theory in that long-term projects where students work, collaborate, and rework the same subject matter has been perceived as more in tune with women's learning style. I can say from experience that it works equally well for men.

I am sure many of you already use this kind of assignment. I encourage you to continue doing so and invite others to try it too. I also urge you to write about particularly successful assignments and to let the rest of us know what has worked for you. We can help one another and our students to bridge the divide between personal and academic writing.